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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses three aspects of bias crimes against sexual minorities: (1) perpetration rates among young adults; (2) perpetrators' motivations; and (3) factors that prevent some people from committing hate crimes. In an anonymous survey of 484 students at 6 community colleges: one in 10 respondents admitted physical violence or threats against presumed gay men or lesbians, and another 24% reported anti-gay name-calling. Assailants tended to be young men in groups who assaulted largely in response to environmental pressures. In particular, a rigid gender code seemed to encourage physical punishment of gender deviance. Four distinct motivations were found to underlie anti-gay violence: self defense, ideology, thrill seeking, and peer dynamics. These impetuses may also apply in hate crimes against racial and religious minorities and women. Due to the environmentally driven nature of most anti-gay bias crimes, educational campaigns within primary and secondary schools are an essential avenue for prevention. In the absence of positive images of minorities in school curricula, negative stereotypes proliferate. These, in turn, foster both bias crimes in the wider community and a climate of pervasive harassment and violence against students who are perceived as deviant. (Contains five tables.) (EMH)

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Psychosocial Motivations of Hate Crimes Perpetrators: Implications for Educational Intervention

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Presented at the 106th Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association at San Francisco, California on August 16, 1998

Summary: This presentation focuses on three aspects of bias crimes against sexual minorities: (1) perpetration rates among young adults, (2) perpetrators' motivations, and (3) factors that prevent some people from committing hate crimes. In an anonymous survey of 484 students at six community colleges, one in ten respondents admitted physical violence or threats against presumed gay men or lesbians, and another 24% reported antigay namecalling. Assailants tended to be young men in groups who assaulted largely in response to environmental pressures. In particular, a rigid gender code encourages physical punishment of gender deviance. Four distinct motivations were found to underlie anti-gay violence: Self Defense, Ideology, Thrill Seeking and Peer Dynamics. These themes may also apply in hate crimes against racial and religious minorities and women. Due to the environmentally driven nature of most antigay bias crimes, educational campaigns within primary and secondary schools are an essential avenue for prevention. In the absence of positive images of minorities in school curricula, negative stereotypes proliferate. These, in turn, foster both bias crimes in the wider community and—most tragically—a climate of oervasive harassment and violence against schoolchildren who are perceived as deviant.

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Introduction

My talk focuses on three specific aspects of bias-related crimes against sexual minorities: (1) perpetration rates among young adults, (2) the motivations of perpetrators, and (3) reasons why other individuals do not commit these crimes. Finally, I will address the implications of my findings for prevention and intervention efforts.

1. Perpetration rates

I examined perpetration rates among a very diverse sample of approximately 500 noncriminal young adults in the greater San Francisco Bay Area.[1] *(See Table 1.)* The rate of antigay violence among these young adults was truly alarming. *(See Table 2.)* One in ten respondents admitted physical violence or threats against people they believed were homosexual, while another 24% reported antigay namecalling. Among male respondents only, the rate of perpetration was significantly higher: 18% for physical violence or threats, and 32% for namecalling. In other words, half of all men admitted some form of antigay aggression. In addition, 23% of nonassailants reported witnessing such incidents. Thus, the majority of all respondents participated in or witnessed antigay incidents. Indeed, assaults on gay men and lesbians were so socially acceptable that respondents often advocated or defended such behaviors out loud in the classrooms, while I was administering

[1] I focused on bias crime against presumed homosexuals, which is the most socially acceptable (and probably the most widespread) form of bias crime among teenagers and young adults. [See, for example, a survey of public school students in New York in which an alarming number of teenagers viewed homosexuals as legitimate targets for attack (Governor's Task Force on Bias-Related Violence, 1988, Final Report, Division on Human Rights, 55 W. 125th Street, New York, NY 10027). See also the results of a 1993 national survey conducted by the American Association of University Women entitled Hostile Hallways (available from AAUW, 1111 16th Street N.W., Washington D.C. 20036).] My survey consisted of a violence inventory, four measures of attitudes, and demographic items. In addition to the survey, I conducted in-depth interviews with 11 assailants who, between them, admitted 21 assaults against 29 presumed homosexuals. Compared with the community college students, these interviewees were more socially marginalized and their crimes tended to be more violent. In addition, some of their crimes included an instrumental component. That is, they targeted gay men in particular for robbery, based on the stereotype that gay men are wealthy and are unlikely to fight back or to report assaults, as well as the perceived ease of luring some gay men to deserted locations.

my survey. Furthermore, almost half of assailants reported a likelihood to assault again in similar circumstances. That is, they either lacked remorse or did not see anything wrong with their behavior.

Most assaults were committed by teenage males in groups. In two-thirds of incidents, the victim was alone. Schools and workplaces were the most frequent sites, suggesting that the dominant perception of hate crime as anonymous street violence may be an artifact of underreporting by victims who know their assailants. *(See Table 3.)*

2. Assailant motivations

Among survey respondents who admitted to assaults, I found four distinct motivations. *(See Table 4.)* The largest number of assailants endorsed the theme of Self Defense. Most commonly, they claimed they were responding to aggressive sexual propositions. Of course, this theme raises a red flag in that wrongdoers often try to blame others. However, my findings suggest that, rather than fabricating accounts of homosexual aggression, assailants interpret their victims' words and actions based on their belief that homosexuals are sexual predators. In other words, once someone is labeled as homosexual, any glance or conversation by that person is perceived as sexual flirtation. Flirtation, in turn, is viewed as a legitimate reason to assault.

The second theme, Ideology, is the one that comes to mind when most people think about hate crimes. Ideology assailants reported that they assaulted due to their negative beliefs and attitudes about homosexuality. These assailants view themselves as social norms enforcers who are punishing moral transgressions. They object not so much to homosexuality itself but to visible challenges to gender norms, such as male effeminacy or public flaunting of sexual deviance. This distinction explains the greatly disproportionate victimization of transvestites and transsexuals. These

gender-norm enforcers target not just homosexuals but also heterosexuals who do not conform to gender roles.

The next two themes, Thrill Seeking and Peer Dynamics, both stem from adolescent developmental needs. Thrill Seekers commit assaults to alleviate boredom, to have fun and excitement, and to feel strong. Typically, they do not express particular animosity toward homosexuals. Rather, they minimize the level of harm done and depict incidents as amusing. Thrill Seekers are most commonly adolescents, both male and female, who lack constructive social activities and perceive themselves as powerless.[2]

Peer Dynamics, the final theme, embodies assaults aimed at proving toughness and heterosexuality to friends. This is the only motivation for which I found a significant sex difference; males were more likely than females to endorse statements associated with this theme. That is not surprising, because adolescent males use assaults on homosexuals to prove their masculine identity by displaying toughness and an endorsement of heterosexuality. Group assaults on homosexuals also foster camaraderie and cohesion within the peer group, which is particularly important during adolescence. Similar to thrill seekers, peer dynamics assailants tend to minimize their personal antagonism toward homosexuals. Consequently, they often blame assaults on their friends and minimize their own roles. The four motivational themes that I have described also apply—with slight variations—to other types of hate crimes, such as those based on race, religion and gender.[3]

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[2] This Thrill Seeking factor is supported by a large body of literature on the developmental functions of adolescent risk-taking. See, for example, C. Lightfoot's (1997) The Culture of Adolescent Risk-Taking.

[3] For example, gender-based bias crimes may involve Self Defense, Ideology and/or Peer Dynamics motivations. In the Self Defense motivation, assailants attack women who are perceived as invading traditionally male workplaces (e.g., military academies). Ideology assailants, meanwhile, attack women who violate female gender norms by being overly assertive. Indeed, it is often hard to tell the difference between anti-lesbian and anti-woman assaults, because women who challenge sexual harassment may be accused of lesbianism not necessarily because they are perceived as homosexual, but because calling a woman a lesbian degrades her as nonfeminine. The Peer Dynamics motivation is perhaps the best example of the connection between bias crimes based on sexual orientation and those based on

3. Nonassailants' motivations for restraint

The motivations that I have presented are pervasive in our culture. This is demonstrated by the fact that nonassailants as well as assailants endorse them. For example, three in ten nonassailants reported a likelihood to assault or harass a homosexual who flirted with or propositioned them, illustrating a widespread cultural permission to engage in violence based on homosexual innuendo. Furthermore, the majority of all respondents reported having friends who had verbally or physically harassed homosexuals.

In light of this cultural permission-giving, what stops the majority of young adults from engaging in bias-driven violence? When asked to explain why they had "never harassed or beaten up a homosexual," nonassailants provided four distinct sets of deterrents. The two largest groups endorsed social tolerance or moral beliefs. A third group credited their personal contacts with homosexuals. But nonassailants are not necessarily more tolerant of homosexuality than are assailants. Rather, they may restrain from assault due to fear of adverse consequences to themselves. Thus, a fourth group of nonassailants reported not committing assaults based on fear of consequences (such as getting in trouble or getting hurt) and lack of opportunity.[4] *(See Table 5.)*

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gender. Group rape of women and group assaults on homosexuals are so similar that the victims sometimes seem interchangeable. This is because the two patterns serve many of the same developmental functions for young males: proving their masculinity and heterosexuality, and increasing peer group cohesion.

Assaults against racial, ethnic or religious minorities also employ all four motivations. The Self Defense theme is employed by perpetrators who believe they are defending their neighborhoods or workplaces from minority encroachment. Ideology assailants, meanwhile, enforce dominant social norms regarding race, sex, nationality and religion. Assailants motivated by Thrill Seeking and/or Peer Dynamics may select victims based on perceived vulnerability, treating social outgroups as basically interchangeable. For example, a recent study of Boston-area hate crimes found that the majority were committed by groups of young white males motivated more by thrill seeking than by prejudice; assault victims included homosexuals, Latinos, Asians, African Americans and Jews. [See J. Levin & J. McDevitt (1993), Hate Crimes: The Rising Tide of Bigotry and Bloodshed.]

[4] Representative explanations from "fear and avoidance" nonassailants include: (a) "Even though I feel that homosexuality is wrong, I am only one individual. If I can't get rid of all of them then I won't mess with none of them." (b) "I have never came across a homosexual where I could express my opinion about their choice of 'life.' But I

Although it is a small portion of nonassailants, the existence of this group establishes that animosity toward a minority group does not in and of itself predict hate crimes. In other words, negative attitudes do not translate directly into illegal behavior. Rather, a certain degree of antigay namecalling and social ostracism is the cultural norm among young Americans, with more extreme violence committed, not surprisingly, by the more violent fringe.

4. Implications for prevention

Given the multiple motivations underlying so-called hate crimes, how can we design successful prevention programs? To intervene successfully, we must realize that the values underlying these crimes are instilled at an early age and are reinforced in group contexts such as schools.

Schoolchildren across the nation engage in pervasive harassment and violence against students perceived as gender-deviant. Antigay slurs target non-aggressive boys, tomboyish girls, children with lesbian or gay parents, and even children who befriend these youngsters. Surveys of schoolchildren indicate that antigay slurs are the most dreaded form of harassment. Children would rather be called anything, would rather even be hit, than be called gay.[5]

Civil actions against school districts for failure to protect sexual minority youth provide additional evidence about the pervasiveness of antigay abuse in the schools. In the first such case to go to trial, a federal jury last year awarded almost a million dollars to a young Wisconsin man. Jamie Nabozny was urinated on, repeatedly beaten, and subjected to a mock rape during which 20 students looked on and jeered; he finally quit school after school administrators ignored multiple pleas from him and his parents

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would like to insult all of these kind of people so they know that God only brought them to this world to be normal human beings." (c) "I didn't harass any [homosexuals] because it's illegal. And I may get in trouble."

and told him he should expect such treatment for being openly gay. Similar lawsuits have been filed in Washington, Illinois and California.

The attorney who represented Mr. Nabozny told me that other victims are calling him from all over the country to report similar abuse. He is amazed by the similar patterns across geographic regions. Typically, verbal taunts by groups of boys escalate over time to more and more severe abuse, culminating in physical beatings. Again and again, this attorney hears the same two responses on the part of school administrators: (1) "Boys will be boys" and (2) "That's what he (or she) has to expect for being openly homosexual."

My research establishes that the majority of young people who harass, bully and assault sexual minorities do not fit the stereotype of the hate-filled extremist. Rather, they are average young people who often do not see anything wrong with their behavior. And the reason they do not see anything wrong is simple–no one is telling them that it is wrong.[6]

Indeed, I have argued that the very use of the term "hate crime" is misleading, because it implies a state of mind that typically is not present. Rather, so-called "hate crimes" are expressions of cultural norms that are entrenched even among preadolescent children. Assaults prosecuted as hate crimes are only the extreme end of a continuum. Rather than focusing only on these extreme cases, I believe it is imperative to confront the cultural climate that fosters everyday harassment and denigration of anyone who is perceived as different. In the absence of positive images of homosexuality in school curricula, negative stereotypes flourish. These stereotypes, in turn, foster both violence within the schools and hate crimes in the community at large.

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[5] See the national survey conducted in 1993 by the American Association of University Women (Hostile Hallways, available from AAUW, 1111 16th Street N.W., Washington D.C. 20036).

[6] In a 1991 survey, 41% of school counselors believed that school administrators do not do enough to combat abuse of gay or lesbian students; 26% stated that teachers themselves perpetuate discrimination against sexual minority youth.

Protection of society's most vulnerable members, that is, our children, needs to become a central tenet of prevention efforts. What is needed is a national policy of proactive intervention against school-based harassment and violence. Anti-bias curricula must be introduced as early as kindergarten and must continue through high school. Teachers must be trained in how to respond appropriately when they see a child being taunted in the classroom or on the playground. And they have to know that they will have the backing of administrators and school board members when they intervene. Sometimes, teachers fail to intervene because they do not understand how harmful namecalling is. But, often, they don't act because they are afraid of repercussions. Confronting antigay namecalling requires being willing and able to define what homosexuality is and to teach children that being gay is not an insult. Teachers who do this are typically reprimanded for "talking about sex." This equation of civil rights with discussion of sex—as opposed to discussion of mutual respect or public safety—is a potent method of barring anti-bias curricula from schools.

In the long run, effective prevention must focus on promoting tolerance and an appreciation of diversity among schoolchildren. As long as the schools are breeding grounds for intolerance and abuse, hate crimes will continue. Children will continue to verbally and physically harass their sexual minority peers until the educational climate becomes such that teachers are empowered to stand up and very directly teach that this behavior is wrong.

Background of researcher

Karen Franklin, Ph.D. is a forensic psychologist in Tacoma, Washington. She has also been a criminal investigator and a legal affairs journalist. Her research into the motivations of hate crime perpetrators was partially funded by a grant from the Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation. A chapter on her interviews with antigay assailants is included in the book Stigma and sexual orientation: Understanding prejudice against lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals *(Gregory M. Herek, editor, 1998, Sage Publications).*

TABLES

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of community college sample (N = 484).

	N	%
SEX		
Male	204	43
Female	266	57
AGE		
Under 21	166	36
21 - 24	164	35
25 - 29	71	15
30 or above	66	14
RACE		
White	185	40
Asian	141	30
Latino	65	14
African American	55	12
Mixed/other	22	4
FATHER'S EDUCATIONAL LEVEL*		
Less than high school graduate	79	17
High school graduate	191	42
College graduate	190	41
MOTHER'S EDUCATIONAL LEVEL*		
Less than high school graduate	87	19
High school graduate	223	48
College graduate	154	33
IMMIGRANT TO UNITED STATES?		
Native-born	324	69
Immigrant	145	31

*Parents' educational level included as a measure of socioeconomic status.

Table 2: Rates of antigay perpetration (total N = 484).

Behavior	Percentage of survey sample		
	All respondents	Males	Females
Physical assault or threats	10%	18%	4%
Verbal-only assault	24%	32%	17%

Table 3: Characteristics of specific incidents, from detailed descriptions provided by 107 assailants.

	N	%
RESPONDENT'S AGE AT TIME		
Under 18	35	34
18 - 20	39	38
21 - 24	21	20
25 or older	8	8
LOCATION		
Respondent's school or workplace	29	28
Respondent's neighborhood	18	17
Primarily gay area	13	12
Other	39	43
NUMBER OF HOMOSEXUALS TARGETED		
Lone homosexual	70	67
Two homosexuals	16	15
3 or more homosexuals	19	18
SIZE OF RESPONDENT'S GROUP		
Respondent was alone	29	28
Respondent was with 1 other person	21	20
Respondent was with 2 or more people	53	51

Table 4: Assailant motivations, individual items ("*I did it because...*") and examples.

	% of Assailants
I. Self Defense:	
Because the homosexual(s) started a fight	45

- *"A gay man tried to hit on me and I took action."*
- *"This guy was making comments about my boyfriend and I told him to shut up you nasty ass faggot. Before I kick your ass."*

II. Ideology:	
Because homosexuals disgust me	39
Because of my moral beliefs	33
Because I don't want [gays] in my neighborhood	23
Because I hate homosexuals	23
Because of previous bad experiences with homosexuals	21
Because homosexuals spread AIDS	19
Because of my religious beliefs	17

- *"I called the girl at work a lesbian because she hadn't been out on a date in a long time. She tried to get smart and I threatened to kick her ass."*

III. Thrill seeking:	
To have fun	35
For excitement	34
Because I was bored	25
To feel strong	17

- *"We was driving along with some eggs & we threw one by one at a couple of faggots."*

IV. Peer dynamics:	
To prove I am not homosexual	26
Because of friends' expectations	25
To show my friends I'm tough	23
To feel closer to my friends	20
Because of the opinions of people I respect	19

- *"My friends went to the gay parade. They saw this woman ... getting into her car. She said she was gay. My friends kidnapped her and her car.... I kept telling them not to do it. Then we drove by the train tracks and they raped her. They left her almost dead because they beat her."*

Table 5: Nonassailant deterrents: Motivations and items.

"I have never harassed or beaten up a homosexual because..."	Endorsements
I. Tolerance	
Because homosexuals have a right to be left alone	322
Because I am against violence	282
Because a homosexual has never [threatened me]	261
II. Moral beliefs	
Because of my moral beliefs	297
Because of my religious beliefs	120
III. Personal contact	
Because I have friends who are homosexual	155
Because I have [homosexual] family members	50
IV. Fear and avoidance	
Because I might get in trouble with the authorities	75
Because I avoid places were [they] might be	67
Because there are no homosexuals in my neighborhood	56
Because I might get hurt	50
Because I might get AIDS	24